What We Mean to Each Other

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What We Mean to Each Other

by lefemmerouge

Summary

It was a day like any other. Aoi thinks back to her declaration on Mount Kinpu, when she told Hinata that she was her cherished and beloved friend. Her remembrance is abruptly interrupted. A bell rings as the cake shop's door opens. She is thrown back into reality. She is surprised to see none other than Hinata, a person she didn't want to see since she is still trying to sort out, in her head, her love for her dear friend. As she stares into her friend's brown eyes, she asks Aoi for a cake shaped like a mountain to give her as a present. Some time after, Aoi inadvertently starts describing Hinata to her fellow employee, Hikari, but hides it by claiming she is speaking about a boy she likes. Hikari suggests giving "him" one of their specialty cakes. Aoi agrees to this. She plans to give Hinata a cake with a message which expresses her innermost feelings. What happens next forces Aoi and Hinata to decide what they mean to one another, either as friends or something more.

Notes

Happy April 30th. Today is Honesty Day (celebrated in the United States) and International Jazz Day (hosted by UNESCO and celebrated worldwide).

I was able to recover the draft of this fic from a certain site, which I last updated on April 7th. That draft was 1,253 words long. I have revised it since then, particularly after rewatching all 12 episodes of "Encouragement of Climb: Next Summit." I finished the first full draft of this fic on April 26th, without a summary, coming in at 4,065 words long, which is over 300% times the length of the original text I had written earlier this month.

If you don't know Encouragement of Climb, that's totally okay! This fic can be read fandom-blind. The series is a bit obscure, but if you like Laid-Back Camp, you'll like this series too. It's a very cute slice-of-life mountaineering series, falling into the cute girls do cute things subgenre. Whether you see how the cake is used as inappropriate, which my dictionary defines as "not appropriate; not suitable, fitting, or proper," or not, is up to you. I kept the tags similar to what I had originally come up with except for one: "amperslash mentioned." I do link to a page about that in this fic, briefly, it is not enough to justify adding it to the additional tags section.

Back in October 2024, I wrote on my Tumblr account that "...Hikari Onozuka (a college student who works at Aoi at the cake store), and the owner of that store, tease Aoi about having a boyfriend." I added that "I really want to do a fic where she reveals that she is now dating Hinata Kuraue...The other couple which would be interesting to do a fic with would be

Kaede Saitō and Yuuka Sasahara...Anyway, it would be fun to do a fic with this slice-of-life series, which falls into the cute girls doing cute things/mountaineering." So, this fic is a fulfillment of what I wrote all that time ago. To this day, there are only *five fics* for this fandom on here, three of which are explicit, one which is mature, and one which is for general audiences. One day, I'd love do a fic with Kaede and Yuuka too. This slice-of-life series should have more fics!

Otherwise, this fic is somewhat inspired by "Our Friendversary," the one-and-only general audiences fic for Encouragement of Climb on here to this day. I'm glad that ContemplateGrapefuit wrote that fic and posted it. If that had not happened, I may have not written, published, and completed this fic in the first place. This fic has also been cross-posted on Squidge World and has been posted on the Internet Archive.

As always, comments and constructive criticism are welcome.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by Our Friendversary by ContemplateGrapefuit

It was like any other day at the acclaimed patisserie, Hanasaika Susuki. Everyone wore a certain standard uniform. She wore a white collared undershirt with a pink ribbon on top, rolled up at the sleeves, and blue tights. Her undershirt was partially covered by a fitting blue apron. A blue beret sat atop her head. She fancied this cute outfit much more than that wretched Santa costume she had worn one fateful Christmas. Back then, she felt incredibly cold all over, even with hand warmers. She had been thinking about her declaration on Mount Kinpu. She had called Hinata her dearest, *most precious*, friend. Hinata had said that their friendship was great because they learned about one another. She wasn't sure why she was thinking about all of this and what had brought it on. Her thoughts were quickly interrupted by a bell ringing as the store's door opened, throwing her back into reality.

"Welcome! What I can I get for you today?…"

She trailed off once she saw who was in the cake shop front of her: a girl with hair some said was black. Others said it was either very dark greyish with shades of red and orange or dark brown. It could look different depending on the light shining on her. It was none other than Hinata! Why in the world was she there? Was she just there to annoy her? She was the *last* person she wanted to see, not because she disliked her, but because all her thoughts for Hinata were such a mess. She didn't know what to think. She was usually much more reserved and shy. There was no doubt that Hinata had brought her out of her shell over the years by being pushy and forceful. She wasn't a big fan of it, but she had accepted it at this point. She had helped her so much and had become not only her close friend but a fellow "mountain girl." As her eyes started to sparkle when she stared into Hinata's brown eyes, her friend spoke.

"I'd like a nice cake shaped like a mountain for my...*best friend*."

In order to provide good service, she smiled, her green eyes shining under the store's electric lights. After she was teased some more, she said, in her typical annoyed voice, "Hinata!" This was something Hinata was used to, as it was part of their typical banter. After her friend paid for the cake, she shouted "See you around, Aoi!" and walked out of the shop. She found Hinata infuriating at times, but she knew they would get through anything together. They had promised that to each other more times than not, whether in a silent promise atop Mount Tanigawa, or on a number of the other trips they had taken together. Those memories would remain with them forever.

Aoi breathed a sigh of relief. A fellow employee, Hikari Onozuka, a university student trying to learn more about cake-making, and with a *lot* of energy, came close. She could tell that Aoi was distressed. Some time ago, Aoi had comforted her after she had been dumped. They had even gone on a date-not-date, claiming it was for "practice" for someone in the future. In reality, she was attracted to Aoi. Bringing her on a date was a way to show her appreciation.

"So, what's the deal with Hinata? You seem to be *really* close." She wasn't sure what they had going on between them, but Aoi had briefly told her about Hinata before. She could tell this girl meant *something* to her. If she had known that Hinata was the one who always worked to make Aoi feel better, the one who was cheerful and happy, she wouldn't have been surprised.

This comment caught Aoi off guard. What in the world did Hikari mean by it? She wanted to move the conversation away from this as quickly as she could. She didn't want to reveal anything about how she truly felt. She was afraid of what Hikari would think if she knew that she was attracted to *a girl*. Would she think of her differently? Or the same? She didn't want to take that chance.

"She's just my friend...we go to the same high school together...moving on...if I wanted to get *my boyfriend* something, then what would be a good present?" She wanted to play into what Hikari and the cake store's owner teased her about some time ago. She couldn't admit her feelings, which still was unsure about, so she tried to obscure it. In the past, Hinata had teased her that she wasn't "popular enough" to have a boyfriend. Sometimes they had even bickered about not neither of them being popular with boys. She honestly did not care about that. As long as she could hang out with her friends, including Hinata, of course, that *would be fine.*

"Oh, what's *he* like?" Hikari said, excitedly. She was curious, as Aoi had *never* mentioned him before.

Aoi wasn't sure what to say. She twirled her light brownish hair with her finger and then scratched the hair near the back of her neck. It was a bit bluish, a result of failed attempts to dye her hair over the years. The dye had become ingrained in her hair color at this point. Without even realizing it, she ended up saying how she felt about Hinata. Once she recognized her error, it was far too late to fix it. She had no choice but to finish what she had been saying, even if in a sort of coded way. "Well...uh...*he's* determined, strong, and can be a bit annoying...but is an incredibly precious person to me...I couldn't...uh...live without *him*...my life would be different without...*him*."

It was hard for her to hide all of this, but she did her best. The cake shop's owner was in the back and couldn't hear their conversation. As such, Hikari was the only one talking to her this time.

"Oh okay...why don't you make him a gift...or give *him* one of our cakes?"

The latter idea intrigued Aoi. However, she wasn't the best at keeping things secret. Once she had tried to keep a surprise party from Hinata and had completely blown it by accidentally revealing it to her. It showed how close they were. So she worried about that a bit. Even so, she really enjoyed when others did unexpected things, like making a cake for her, as her friends did for her one Christmas some time ago, the same one she wore that awful Santa suit. Perhaps she could do the same for Hinata. After all, she still recalled when Hinata said she could be thoughtful, sometimes. While some would have taken Hinata's comment as a slight, she saw it as a bit of a compliment.

"I could do that. Thanks for the suggestion, Hikari. I'll *do my best* to make sure it all works out."

Hikari was happy for her. Maybe Aoi would find someone that respected her for who she was. She hoped that would be the case, as she knew that Aoi was a good girl, with good values. She knew that much from their time together working in the cake shop. Aoi was trying to earn extra money to pay for her mountaineering trips. She had even used some of

her wages in an attempt to dye her hair blue. She only wanted to experiment on a certain section. She later dropped the idea, realizing that the dye was too expensive and that she should buy supplies for trips instead. As such, her hair had a light bluish sheen, that could be seen from the front, with the dyed hair touching the back of her neck.

They chatted a little more until more customers came in. In no time at all, the day had come to a close. Aoi had changed out of her work clothes and into something more casual. Hikari waved. “Let me know how it goes with *your* boyfriend!" Aoi smiled sheepishly. Unlike Hinata, she dressed in more feminine clothes, often wearing a skirt and tights. Hinata wore that as well as part of a school uniform. Even so, more often than not, she wore pants and a shirt, eschewing the feminine look. She only wore what she thought was comfortable. She did not care if people saw that as "masculine" or "feminine." Aoi, in contrast, cared more about that. The stage was set for what came next.

The days passed. Aoi picked up her cake for order. She was ready for the surprise. She had everything set up, everything ready. She'd make sure that nothing went wrong. She didn't want to mess it up *this time*. She was incredibly nervous. She was waiting for her twin-tailed brown-haired friend to arrive. She knew that Hinata cared about her. As a fellow mountain girl, this would be yet another hill to climb, one which she wasn't sure she was fully prepared for.

"I'm so glad you came," she said while smiling. Her friend looked at her quizzically. Why had Aoi called her there? This all seemed a bit unusual. She wasn't sure what this was about. Aoi handed her a bag. "Open it!" she demanded.

Her friend opened the bag. Seeing a box inside, she grabbed it. Aoi motioned toward it.

Opening the top of the cardboard box, it revealed the cake and its writing scribbled on the top in cursive. It said "I love you, Hinata." This caught her friend off kilter. Is that Aoi had been planning? She had not expected this *at all*.

“Hinata, I'm not always the best with words...but this cake says all I wanted to say."

Coming close to her, Hinata wrapped her arms around Aoi. She wasn't sure what else to do. She had cared about Aoi for years. She had helped her move one step at a time. She had worked with her on a plan to climb Mount Fiji again. This was after she felt bad for leaving Aoi behind when she had altitude sickness the time she had climbed the same mountain, the highest in Japan, and failed. She had been there for her when she saw how depressed her friend was after that first climb. She could surely be enthusiastic, as much as her mom, and determined. While she usually pulled her friend into situations, Aoi had done the same on occasion, like the time when she told her to come fly fishing.

"Thanks for telling me…I love you too...*as a friend*."

Aoi shook her head. How could Hinata be so dense? Sometimes she didn't get it!

"Hinata...I don't love you *that way*," she paused, and then added, "I love you *romantically*. It's still very confusing for me, but my feelings *can't* betray me. They never will."

While this somewhat confused Hinata, she still understood that Aoi taken a brave step by telling her. She knew how hard it was for people to come out. She had some lesbian and bisexual friends at school, and she tried to remain understanding, even if she messed up sometimes. The last thing she'd ever want was to hurt Aoi. She was good at looking out for people. Even when she teased Aoi, she cared about her deeply. She supported her when she was thrust into the role of being group leader of their school class and she often tried to make her feel better. She was pleased when Aoi made friends in her class, even though she was a bit sad that Aoi wasn't in the same class as her.

Having two people with different ideas about each other, and how they feel, is never a good thing. It can certainly lead to misunderstandings. Aoi decided to go for it. She stepped forward. Hinata didn't even have a second chance to think about what her friend had just said, when she saw her passionately smooch her right cheek. She could have kissed her on the mouth, but she was far too nervous to do so. Hinata knew that this kind of kiss could be, at times, platonic. The same could be said for when someone kissed you on the forehead or the back of the hand. There was no doubt in her mind that what her friend had done was definitely *romantic*. That was obvious.

Her face was completely flushed. She was at a loss for words. She wasn't aware that *some* people had different views on what a kiss with another person meant. Some engaged in behaviors that people usually associated with romantic, and sexual, relationships, within their close friendships. Others had relationships which weren't fully platonic, nor were they romantic. Perhaps what they had was close to that, but Hinata didn't know about any of that. Aoi didn't either. It wasn't taught in their schools or noted by any one on social media. They thought there only two boxes: romantic relationships and friendships. They were unaware that some relationships blurred the line between both.

That wasn't what Aoi wanted. Hinata didn't know what to think about all of this. She felt a bit overwhelmed. "Aoi...I-I'll let you know my answer," she said. She then began running off. As she did so, Aoi yelled, "HINATA!," snatching the cardboard box back and throwing pieces of the cake toward her friend because she was so upset at her. She had put everything into setting this up, preparing it for her. And her friend had the gall to treat her this way! She couldn't believe it. She was so furious. She ran home with tears streaming down her face. She wanted to make Hinata pay for this. She wasn't sure how, but she planned on figuring out a way. As she ran home, her thoughts continued to be jumbled.

Back inside her home, she noticed that her mom, Megumi, was there and cooking in the kitchen. Her mom could tell that her daughter was distressed. "Aoi, sweetie, what is it?" She looked at her mom with sheer terror. Could she come out to her in this state? What if her mom told her to get lost? She had heard the horror stories. She decided to not tell the whole story. She wanted to ease into it. She wiped the tears from her face. "It's Hinata. She made me *really angry* today." Her mom listened carefully. She had often heard Aoi complain about Hinata from time to time. However, they always seemed to resolve their differences. She was grateful that Hinata helped her daughter have more self-confidence and make her feel better when she was down. Both girls, as she saw it, were often attached at the hip. Aoi breathed deeply. It would be difficult to tell her mom about this. She felt, and hoped, that her mom would understand.

"I-I-I gave her a gift today...and...she felt differently about it than I thought she would." Her mom didn't understand what the big issue was. She was unaware of what Aoi had thought of telling her. "You should talk to her, then."

Aoi really wanted to, but she struggled at what she would tell her friend. She breathed deeply. She didn't want to come out, especially not now. "Hinata is so important to me...she's helped me so many times...she has encouraged me...I don't want to lose her...I messed up...I don't want her to hate me." Her mom shook her head. She rubbed her daughter's head. She did what she could to calm her down. She didn't want her to feel bad about herself.

At that very moment, there was a frantic knock on the outside door. Aoi's mom left the kitchen and walked into the foyer. She opened the door. A twin-tailed brown-haired girl was standing there, the same one her daughter had just been talking about. "Is Aoi here?" she asked. Aoi's mom nodded. The girl bowed. "I want to apologize to her. I really screwed up." Aoi's mom smiled. "I'll leave you both to it. She was just talking about you, actually." As she left the room, Aoi remained. She wanted to flee but never had the opportunity. That was because her friend came rushing in as quickly as she could and wrapped her arms around her. Now *she* was the one who was crying. This was something that Aoi had not expected at all. "I'm so sorry. I was *so insensitive*." Aoi shook her head. She didn't want to make Hinata feel worse than she already did.

"It's okay, I acted badly too. Can we talk in my room?" Hinata nodded. They walked up to the stairs and to her room, with their hands interlocked. Once inside, Aoi firmly closed the door. She wasn't sure where to start with this. What could she say? Aoi mustered her courage. She couldn't let this fade away into nothing. She couldn't just dismiss it. "Why did you run away from *me*? Do you not like me anymore? Do you want to..."

Her words were cut off by her friend's finger. She almost laughed, but stopped herself. She didn't want to make her friend depressed or start to spiral. How could she explain this? "I've never had a girl confess they loved me before...and I never expected you'd be the one...it's *so overwhelming*." Aoi understood on a certain level. Despite Hinata had said, she was still angry at her. Why didn't she just talk to her right then and there?

"I wouldn't have thrown that good cake that I bought as a present at you...if you had talked to me...and..." Her thought process stopped again when Hinata planted a kiss on her cheek. Her pale, and alabaster, skin turned bright red. What in the world was Hinata doing? She almost wanted to back away. She wondered if her friend felt the same way about her. Or was she just leading her on? She shook her head. That couldn't be it. Hinata would never do that.

"Aoi, I-I-I shouldn't have done that...so many emotions are going through my head now...can we take this slow and steady?...I want to have fun with you...whether as a friend...or *something else*...I don't have experience with a relationship...I have no idea what to do next." Aoi was surprised. She had thought that Hinata was going to put her off. Her anger from before dissipated. She had no reason to get revenge on her now.

"Y-Y-You want to my...uh...girlfriend?" Hinata laughed. Aoi pouted. Why did she have to act this way? When Hinata rubbed her head against hers, she said, softly, "I'm willing to try it...I don't want this to change anything between us...I still want us to still have fun together...I

want to be the one who cheers you up when you are down...I want to be the one who is always looking out for you." Aoi grinned. She hadn't expected a response like this from Hinata, especially since her friend could be more of a risk-taker. In contrast, she was much more cautious. This was partially why she detested rollercoasters with a passion. She did not want the person Hinata, someone she originally saw as very best friend, and could now be something more than that, to drift away. She wanted Hinata to be close to her no matter what.

Aoi smiled and nodded. She rubbed her brown two part hair pin, visible from the front of her head, with a thicker part on top and thinner part below. The latter part was one third the size of the top part. Hinata had given Aoi this pin as a birthday present some years ago and she'd kept it since then. It was one of her most precious things. Over years, she she gotten into fights with Hinata, but she knew that her now-girlfriend had always looked out for her. She knew that mountains can mean different things to different people. Some even said that when you reach the top of a mountain, keep climbing. For her, it was different. She was starting a new mountain, looking up at the dizzying heights, the highs and lows ahead, and figuring out what a relationship with her childhood friend would mean. She knew exactly who to ask about all of this, although she'd have to keep it coded.

"Please don't get angry, Hinata...I want to ask my co-worker, you know, Hikari, some advice about...beginning a relationship." Hinata looked at her strangely. Why would she get angry? Aoi felt a little nervous about telling her this. "She keeps asking me if I have a boyfriend and I told her the other day I have one." When she said those words, Hinata started fuming. She already had a partner? What was this all about then? Aoi waved her arms. "I don't have one, Hinata! I...was talking about *you*...I was afraid that if I admitted that I liked a girl then she might...think of me differently." Now Hinata understood. She had friends in school whose identities ranged across the rainbow and in the process she had heard their struggles. She sympathized with them, even though she never thought much about any possible partners for herself, or who she was attracted to. So, this was new for her too.

Aoi typed on her phone to Hikari, asking for any advice on relationships, saying she had confessed to the person she loved, and that she was with that person right now. To her surprise, at that very moment, her blond-haired friend called her. It wasn't a regular call. It was a video call. She was not prepared. Her phone flew out of her hand and into Hinata's. Aoi was making all sorts of hand gestures at her, none of which she understood. She pressed accept.

"Hikari, it's nice to see you!" she said, to Aoi's embarrassment. She still wanted to hide the truth from Hikari, although it was nearly impossible to do so now. Hikari put the pieces together. "Yeah, same here. So...did Aoi confess to you?...I want *all the details*." Hinata didn't know what she should say. She didn't want to humiliate Aoi any more. She whispered to her. The last thing she wanted was a new rift between them. She knew that Hikari wouldn't let up. So she permitted Hinata to tell *some* of the story, although not all of it. Hinata was fine with that, even though she knew that what Aoi was feeling might still be a sore subject, so she tread carefully.

"Uh...well...she gave me a cake...saying 'I love you' on top...some things happened...and I uh...agreed to be her girlfriend." She laughed nervously. "You know, us mountain girls stick together." Hikari was nodding along. She could see that she wouldn't get anything more out

of her, nor Aoi, after that. She teased them both with an absurd idea. "Did there happen to be...the throwing of cake?" Aoi and Hinata didn't say a word. She shook her head. "You know, we have a security camera outside the cake shop. I saw the whole thing unfold when I came in for my shift." Aoi wasn't sure how that was possible. How could she know? Was there even a camera? She didn't remember one.

She could see this touched a nerve. She tried to lower the temperature. "I'm only joking. That didn't happen, right?" Aoi refused to say anything, but Hinata happened to blurt it out. Before she did, she mouthed, "I'm sorry." She exclaimed, "I ran away after she told me she loved me...then she threw cake at me...it was like some soap opera." Aoi couldn't believe this. She knew that her now-girlfriend had apologized. Even so, she couldn't help but huff. She wanted to get back at her *somehow*. "Fine. I did, but I've already been on a date with a girl. And I'll never tell you who it was!" Hikari chuckled. She shook her head. "I told you that wasn't a date! My boyfriend had broken up with me the day before."

Almost immediately, Hinata was jealous. What in the world was she talking about? Why was she trying to sort of one-up her? "*When* did this happen?" Aoi could see that this could get bad. She grumbled. "I...went with her to...a lake...she wanted only me to come...you know I had asked her if you could come too...but she said no." Hinata was starting to think that this coworker, of Aoi's, had a crush on her, although she didn't say anything.

"Okay, Aoi, *I believe you*." She turned to Hikari. "Well...if you have any tips for us...we'll be all ears." This was tough. She'd never been asked to be a romance advisor for anyone, especially two girls. She replied. "I will." She hung up after that. The jealousy that Hinata had felt had faded away. In the past, she had felt left out, when Hinata did activities with other girls. "We should go there sometime...to that lake...*together*." Aoi smiled. "I'd like that."

They still had a lot to figure out. Their friends didn't know about their new relationship nor did their parents. That would be another hurdle overcome. They'd do it while supporting one another. They'd be climbing this mountain together.

End Notes

I had originally planned to post this fic on Sunset, as part of that platform's Femslash Refresh 2026 event. Sadly on April 17th, I was perma-banned by the admin, Agnes, for mishandling interactions with a few users, despite apologizing to those users, removing certain passages of fics, and apologizing to the Sunset admin (and others). As such, I would strongly recommend **against** *anyone* joining that site, or Superlove. Both admins (Melo/Kat for Superlove, Agnes for Sunset) are friends with each other. Those admins are very particular and not in a good way. I find the whole circumstance deeply unfortunate. I wish it could have been resolved a much better way. This will be the last fic of the "Originally on Sunset" series I am posting on this account.

When posting this fic here, I eschewed the tags "Sunset's Femslash Refresh 2026", "Exclusive to Sunset", and "First Encouragement of Climb fic on here" on here, as they are not applicable. I would like to reprint what Agnes told me about drafts, which everyone should keep in mind: "Re: your points on the drafts, I am sorry but there is no way for me to download the files from the administration back-end. The reason I have not replied until now is because I have been waiting to confirm with other otwarchive admins if it is possible. It is not."

If I had posted this on Sunset, it would have fulfilled a prompt by DespairSystem, for any fandom and any ship, which was: "inappropriate use of food." I had a draft sitting on my computer after I created the document in October 2024. I had *originally* planned to publish this fic on National Call a Friend Day (December 28th). I said, in a earlier A/N, that that day "seemed fitting since Aoi and Hinata are friends, but also not at the same time, if that makes sense." I decided to lean more into femslash when completing the fic. Maybe, one day I will wrote a spinoff which has them as *only* friends.

Apart from that, I have notes from watching "Next Summit" (effectively the third season of Encouragement to Climb) about how Aoi, Hinata, and her friends (Kaede, Honoka, and Kokona) watch the sunrise at the top of Mount Fiji together, then go to the real summit (Kengamine). I also have notes that in one episode, Hinata is angry at Aoi for being late but Hinata gets hurt during the climb, with Aoi taking care of Hinata after that (changing the dynamics). In those notes, I further state that Aoi goes on a date/friend hang with Kasumi, Hinata, and a few others (other classmates), when they decide to hike up a mountain rather than taking a cable car. I additionally noted that in another episode, Hinata says Aoi has grown up. Pertinently, I have notes on an episode when Kokona, Honoka, Hinata, and Aoi go on a trip, saying that it seems that Honoka may have a crush on Kokona. While both say they *only* want to be better friends, Honoka tells Kokona she loves her photos as they have a certain warmth to them and vice versa. So that's another possible fic to write. On the other hand, I could write a spinoff version of this fic (as stated above) which is not romantic. After all, as stated in the anime, spring is "mountain girl season"!

While the wikiquote page for the word mountain was not helpful (except for one quote), I did use Eden Espinosa's song "I Miss Mountains," which was seemingly written for the musical "Next to Normal", as an inspiration for certain parts. I'd love to write about this fandom in the future if I ever get the chance.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!